

COPTIC NETTING, OF ABOUT 500 A. D. FROM EGYPT. ORIGINAL IN THE  
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

## OLD EGYPTIAN LACE

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IT is with wonder and awe that we, men and women of the modern times, look upon the weavings and laces, made by men and women, hundreds, nay, thousands of years ago. We look upon these fabrics with the greatest interest, for though our machines have attained a degree of perfection we little dreamed of years ago, we are not able to do what the ancients have done. It is not only that we do not exactly know yet how they worked, but what they have made too is so far above our own artistic ability, that we feel as little children staring at what "those who know" have wrought. It is not that the way the ancients worked was so very complicated; as a matter of fact their means were very simple, very much more so than ours are, but they lived under very different conditions. They could give all their time to their work, for time was not worth then what it is worth now, and they were able to bestow all their energy and attention upon it. Besides, they had only simple tools and their artistic ambition, perhaps religious ambition, being highly cultivated, they took infinite pains to excel in workmanship.

When we look at the Peruvian Textiles, we marvel how any people could work in such a way, with so much forethought as to the technical part and such a delicacy of execution. It is only the utmost love that can enable any one to execute such perfect workmanship. It is well for us all, working so many centuries after these people have lived, and with so many more technical facilities, to study these old fabrics. They may enrich our own work in a sublime way.

But it is not only that the woven objects and laces are admired for their execution, coloring and conception, but the scientific world too has turned its attention to the handicrafts, realizing how great a help the knowledge of these would be in understanding the habits and customs of mankind.

Several museums in America and Europe carefully exhibit many pieces of textile fabric found in the graves of Egypt and Peru. Among those from Egypt are many pieces executed in a kind of open work, a kind of lace. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Natural History Museum in New York, have lovely caps in this technique. It is about

this kind of lace—which I have studied for many years—that I want to tell a few things. At first sight one would think that these caps were made in the bobbin lace technique, but on a closer inspection one instantly notices the error. One sees that these caps are not made in any of the techniques we know. They are not sewn with a thousand patient little stitches, sewed together to a fine solid cord and laid out in different patterns with open work in between. Not made on the cushion, like our bobbin laces, where the fine threads are rapidly thrown in all directions by nimble fingers, a simple wonder to those who know the art of lace-making.

When many of the objects from the graves of Egypt were brought to Vienna by Mr. Graf, in the middle of the last century, a lady teacher at the "Fachschule für Kunststickerei," Mrs. Louise Schinnerer, had the opportunity to study these most closely. However, she could not find a way to copy them in any of the techniques used to-day. Nevertheless she did not lose courage, considering that perhaps among the peasant population of her own country some reminiscence of the work unknown to her hitherto might still exist. She began her inspection and really found a kind of workmanship among the Ruthenians in Galicia that enabled her to copy the laces of Egypt. It was indeed no lace making, but a kind of netting work. The Ruthenian peasant women netted their lace caps and the insertions for their towels and bed linen in a simple way, and the men wore long scarves made in the same manner. The women use a standing frame, whereupon are stretched two strings, one at the top and one at the bottom, the space between the two strings indicating the measure of the object to be made. Then the thread, which is wound on a ball, is fastened to the bottom string on the left and passed over the top string, again down to the bottom string, and so on, like a skein, till the number of threads required is reached.

By this time there have been formed two fields of threads, one front field and one back field, as one easily understands, keeping in mind that the threads are passed round the two strings like a skein. One begins working in the right upper corner, taking two of the back threads between right forefinger and thumb and pulling the threads to the front. The crossing of the front and back threads may be seen in Figure I. Now the first front thread is slipped to the back field. The next back thread (now *one* thread) is taken up in the same way and the next front one slipped, and so on till all the back threads are lying on the

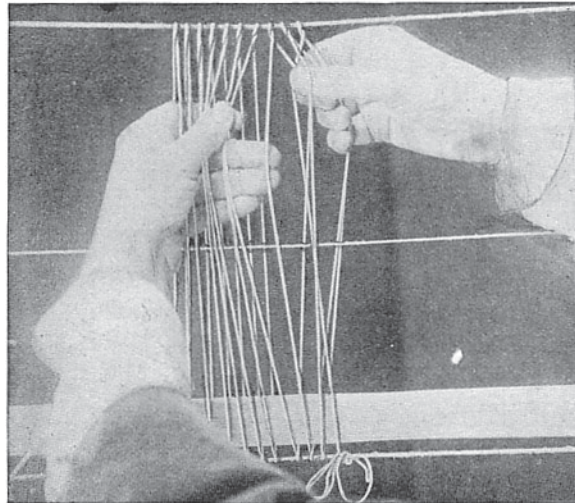
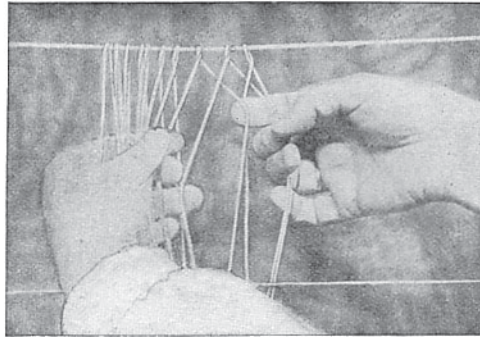


FIGURE II

right hand of the worker. A wooden sword is then placed between the two fields of threads and moved toward the top string, where it beats up all the crossed threads. Then the sword beats up the crossed threads at the bottom string. [Figure II.] This method of crossing the back and front threads is continued; it is, in fact, the principle on which all variations are based. One sees directly that two halves are formed, whereas the hand only works once. The worker takes advantage of this result to make two objects at the same time or two halves of one object.

This pure stitch of simple crossing is so beautiful in its flexibility

and gloss that it is worth while to employ it for many articles of modern use. As the reader will have noticed, this netting is worked in rows from right to left. This regular turning of the yarn in the same direction gives a lustre and at the same time a simplicity one seeks in vain in any other lace. The light falls on every thread in the same way, whereas in bobbin laces it falls now on a thread turned to the left, now on one turned to the right. If I were to name an example I should call before your mind the Maltese laces and the Spanish ones, especially those of white silk. These laces show none of the distinction one looks for in an object of art. Now one of the characteristics of distinction is serene repose—and this is exactly what the art of Egyptian lace making shows to perfection. These considerations may perhaps explain the fact that the most beautiful bobbin laces are executed in extra fine yarn, so that the restlessness of the light is reduced to a minimum. The reader will immediately understand what I mean when he looks at both fabrics through a magnifying glass, so that the difference between the two techniques becomes clearly visible.

After the Egyptian laces had once drawn the attention, it was proved not only that the Ruthenians have been practising this technique till today, but also that in some other parts of Europe too, *e. g.* in Sweden and in Norway, people are still using it for the very same purposes. In Norway this technique is called "Sprang." Maybe it would be found in more parts of Europe if researches were made.

In the textile collection of the Austrian Museum are three women's caps, left by a lady of Liebenbürgen, in the seventeenth century, which have been made of silk and gold threads by means of the same technique. The fact that these costly materials were used proves that the technique was not only practised by a peasant population, but that it was fully appreciated by the higher classes. But it is not only in Austria that specimens of this technique were found. In Spain and in Holland we find silk sashes of superb quality, some measuring about four yards. They were worn by the state foresters and the cornets of the guilds. Our museums in Amsterdam, Haarlem, Rotterdam and the still existing guilds in many cities in Holland possess such sashes, dating from the period between 1700 and 1840 or thereabout. In many an old family these sashes, sometimes decorated with all kinds of devices and characters, are taken out when asked for. I possess a baby's frock of fine linen yarn, netted in a lovely pattern, dating from the time of the Em-

pire, and two purses in colored silk worked in vertical stripes. These objects have certainly not been made in a factory, as is perhaps the case with the sashes in Holland, but are doubtless lady's work. All this proves that this technique had not merely been lingering on all through the middle ages and up to the middle of the 19th century, but was still flourishing.

Mrs. Schinnerer, who, by her indefatigable researches, has given us back one of the most interesting techniques, in her *Antike Handarbeiten*, speaks of the Spanish Faja, a sash in red silk which the Spanish general, even when he is in civil dress, has to wear under his coat. This sash, which is several yards long, is worked in one piece and does not show the two halves running in opposite directions, which are essential characteristics of the Egyptian and Ruthenian netting. The way to manufacture this kind of scarf is, as I have been fortunate enough to discover, making two scarves at a time by stretching the skein of threads over more than one frame. Thus one can attain a considerable length, which offers great advantages when the technique is used for modern articles.

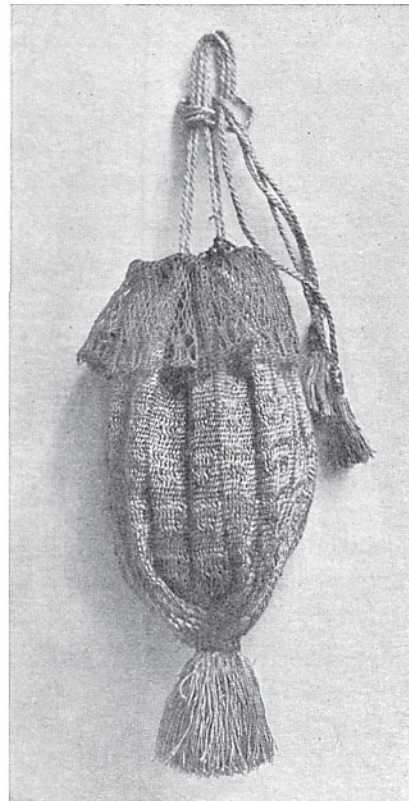
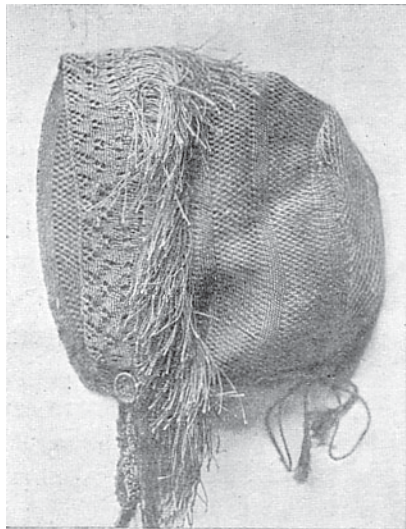
It proved easy to introduce differently colored stripes into the netting, but these stripes, except in a few cases, were all running in a vertical direction.

A few years ago Prof. Six, of Amsterdam, showed me an earthenware dish of Italian origin, dating from 300 B. C., which is decorated with a painting of a woman's head, wearing a cap of curious construction. Prof. Six thought this cap might be a copy of netting work, and though I agreed with him there, for many things pointed in that direction, *e. g.*, the loosely twisted upper part, the essential character of this technique, whose netting showed in this cap several small sections—my greatest objection was, that I had not succeeded in producing patterns running in a horizontal direction. Prof. Six gave me a photograph of the dish and I set to work to solve the problem, feeling sure that it *could* be solved. But how? The only way was to reflect on it, to consider thoroughly all the possibilities, and so I did, until, one day, I suddenly saw how it was to be done. But there is a great difference between knowing how a thing should be done and doing it well. Many attempts have been made before the cap on the dish could be accurately copied.

I was very grateful to have had an opportunity to study this new side of the netting technique, for now I could make not only the horizontal line, but I was able to combine the horizontal with the vertical

line; in one word, I had gained the utmost freedom of design. I have been enjoying the beauty of this work for many years, impressed ever and again by its mysterious loveliness, and realizing with unceasing interest the unexpected prospects which it has opened.

It is a great joy to have discovered this art that has lent such added interest to my life, and if the result of my efforts should be of any service in awakening the interest of others, I shall feel amply rewarded.



EGYPTIAN LACE CAP AND BAG

EXECUTED BY MME. VAN  
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